Lynch / Rivette. Phantom Ladies, or: It Doesn’t Hurt to Fall Off the Moon: “Mulholland Dr.” and “Céline and Julie Go Boating”

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Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

Christopher Small 24 Dec 2015
This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*

> “I’m going to the movies!”
> — Pauline Kael

In *Céline and Julie Go Boating*, Jacques Rivette takes the stuff of living—quite literally documentary shots of Paris in summertime 1973—and makes it a kind of mock-backdrop to a world of psychedelic fiction. The opening scene, built from criss-crossing point-of-view shots, takes routine images of park-goers milling around on a warm day and whips them into a particular perspective, that of curious, cooing librarian Julie (Dominique Labourier), who sedately watches the goings-on while leafing through her book of magic. In documenting Julie’s subsequent pursual of Juliet Berto’s ragtag Céline, an impulse-effort to return shedded belongings from Céline’s massive plume of scarfs and satchels, Rivette sketches out a map of the film’s main territory: an interior world of phantoms and fiction, set simultaneously in and in-between the streets, parks, cafes, and clubs of Paris, that only we and the characters are privy to. Like children arranging tufts of grass, fistfuls of gravel into simulacra of fortresses and battlefields, Rivette, Berto, Labourier, et al, rework elements of the real world so that they might create a significance, as pieces of the recondite puzzle, in our minds.

In *Mulholland Dr.*, David Lynch’s would-be remake, it’s played out in something like the opposite way: characters, living out their lives as archetypes, their psychologies as superficial as their roles (the amnesiac, the up-and-coming starlet, the movie director surrounded by rat-faced money men) are hackneyed, find their only outlet in other forms of role-playing. In a startling mid-film shift, Naomi Watts’ Betty morphs from the ‘30s cliché of simple, small-town beauty seeking her first Hollywood role—which she’d later play for real, far less effectively, in Peter Jackson’s *King Kong*—into a knowing, heartbreakingly tender victim of forbidden advances, unravelling before us (and a handful of stunned producers) during an audition, and back again. Her turn as Betty until that point so perfectly calibrated to the all-surface role of the would-be starlet, Watts’ performance of that scene, in that scene, seems to freight her character with a significance that reappears with equal intensity only in the late stages of the film. That is, after she has transformed into “Diane Selwyn,” the paranoiac whose guilt is ostensibly responsible for dreaming up *Mulholland Dr.*’s whole first section. Lynch suggests that the only way to break free of this smog of archetype and surface is to act your way out of it; to tap some underground resource for dimensionality when the world around you proves too far-fetched and lacking in any real depth.

Similarly, Rivette posits a split, in *Céline and Julie Go Boating*, between the outside world that we glimpse on the skirting peripherals of the action and the baroque imagination-space through which Celine and Julie so vividly, so raucously traipse. Both movies reverse at the halfway point: *Céline and Julie Go Boating*’s open-

air theatre is gradually usurped by the strained histrionics of a phantom chamber-drama in which the girls play roles as characters and spectators both, while *Mulholland Dr.*'s two leads—Betty and her lover/fellow sleuth (Laura Harring)—appear to switch roles after visiting a theatre-show whose own sibylline subject is none other than the ephemerality of illusion. Crucially though, the split in *Mulholland Dr.* suggests, like *Lost Highway* or Rivette's *Secret défense*, that whomever these women may be, they'll always be struggling—in true L.A. fashion—to make some new kind of tenuous impression in their next role. The twisting of the movie onto its head at the halfway point generates only new avenues in which these characters might stumble upon new identities. The role-reversal presents the possibility that faint new lines might be traced along a flat, shimmering surface, re-polished after the split, without penetrating its hidden, plausibly non-existent depths.

Integral to *Céline and Julie Go Boating* is the same feeling of liquid identity, but Rivette's characters are knowing spectators to their own madness, to the ultimate collapse of their personas; their tics and mannerisms influencing and trading with each other's affectations. Indeed, the same manoeuvre, a "persona swap" (to borrow Miriam Bale's nifty phrase), occurs in the movie's last 30 seconds, as Julie wakes up as Céline and Céline Julie, and the adventure continues. "A new organism," wrote Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber in 1977, "the atomization of a character, an event, a space, as though all of its small spaces have been desolidified to allow air to move amongst the tiny spaces." With this pairing, the series' most dazzling by far, one unearths an eldritch key that might prove useful in unlocking at least part of David Lynch and Jacques Rivette: for one, the mystery reverberates back into endless inner space, and for the other—bursting out in a wide, borderless fan-motion—into indefinite outer-space.